Research Article

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Nobody Knows My Name: The Masquerade of Mourning in the Early 1980s Artistic Productions of Michael Jackson and Prince

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Abstract: The article analyses Michael Jackson's album *Thriller* and Prince's movie *Purple Rain*. We explore their camp aesthetics and their recasting of the cultural representations of the black male. Jackson's and Prince's performative personas are both liberatory and burdened with the received cultural scripts of black masculinity. We claim that their employment of camp is political rather than escapist and depoliticized. Camp serves them as a platform to mourn the cultural displacement of the black male body in a postslavery America. In particular, the two artists distance themselves from the extensive ideological and physical pressures exerted on the black male body in the early 1980s. As a result, their performances are complexly de-Oedipalized. Prince in *Purple Rain* refuses to assume the patriarchal position of the Father. Analogously, Jackson fashions himself as a Peter Pan-like eternal adolescent who never makes his final identification as either heterosexual or LGBTQ desiring agent. In the coda to the article, we reach beyond the 1980s to explore a more flexible approach to camp in the artistic output of twenty-first-century African American performers of Queercore and Afrofuturist scenes, which were partially enabled by Jackson's and Prince's performances.

Keywords: Michael Jackson, Prince, camp, black camp, *Thriller*, *Purple Rain*

I'm not a woman, I'm not a man. I am something you will never understand.
Prince

I'm a black American. I'm proud to be a black American. I am proud of my race. I am proud of who I am.
Michael Jackson

In his text on late twentieth-century black masculinity "The Gangsta and the Diva," Andrew Ross argues that the affectless masculinity of the rapper and the excessive histrionics of the snap queen form a dialectic "response to the phenomenal social pressure exerted upon black males" and that these "theatrical versions of black masculinity are as much methods of deflecting or neutralizing white disapproval as modes of expressing black traditions" (159, 161). Among the text's examples and six photographic illustrations of the black divas, there are Michael Jackson and Prince. In this article, we will argue that Ross's claim that the black diva represents "a camp alchemist's transmutation of black female assertiveness" (159) does not ideally fit Prince and Jackson as they do not draw on African American sassy femininity. When read historically, the figures of the gangsta and the diva as conceptualized by Ross are informed by the echoes of nineteenth-century Jim Crow mythology. The gangsta seems to be a contemporary variation of the black brute, mediated by the 1960s Black Power icons and 1970s blaxploitation stars, whereas, the diva feeds on

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the image of the black minstrel dandy or zip coon, which was supposed to simultaneously ridicule black attempts at imitating white cultured manners and at the same time to mock the lifestyle of the leisure class. Rather than fit neatly either of the categories, Prince and Jackson seem to creatively exploit and transgress this dual heritage of visual aesthetics of the black male body. Using camp as a representative strategy, they circumvent the received representations of black masculinity. Their performances, as well as camp in general, have been read frequently as superficial, commercial, and hence apolitical. We will demonstrate that, to the contrary, camp serves the two artists as a platform to mourn the cultural displacement of the black male body in a post-slavery America in critically and politically meaningful ways.[1]

The two black musicians do more than just imaginatively signify on the still powerful minstrel mythology. In their camp aesthetics, they significantly widen the horizon of—perhaps not only black—masculine representations and identities. In his text "Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective," Marlon B. Ross contends that James Baldwin's "high camp" and the "aura of sissified, defensive self-exposures of others' perversions" was attacked and rejected by the Black Power and Black Arts Movement's leaders in general and by LeRoi Jones in particular (293). Twenty years after Jones's attack on Baldwin in his "Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots" (1963), Prince and Michael Jackson emerged as "black superstars," that is achieved top positions both in the black and the pop charts (Garofalo 81). We will argue that—analogously to Wilde, who in his stylizations and "sophisticated aestheticism" "reclaim[ed] the much despised sissy stereotype" (Burrows) for the gay community of the early twentieth century—Prince and Jackson managed to successfully reclaim effeminate masculinity for mainstream culture of the 1980s.[2]

Among possible factors that made the success of their "showbiz repertoire of draggy gestures" possible (Ross 161), there are the second wave of the feminist movement as well as the post-Stonewall gay rights activism and its growing visibility. In the academia, the rise of gender studies and poststructuralist challenges to essentialist identity also contributed to the fascination with gender-bending and artifices of self-fashioning, which in turn had an impact on culture industry. The music scene that aesthetically paved the way for Prince's and Jackson's personas was the visual culture of Glam Rock and figures such as David Bowie, who "totally transgressed the codes of masculinity by appearing on the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World* album [(1970)], wearing a 'men's' dress" (Gregory 50). In the context of black US culture, among Prince's and Jackson's immediate predecessors, there are the highly stylized personas of Little Richard and Jimi Hendrix in his velvet jackets and lace frilled shirts. Furthermore, as Georgina Gregory argues, generally, the fashion climate of the 1970s "offered a visual challenge to conventional representations of masculinity": "the evolution of Unisex fashions played an important role in making androgyny more acceptable within popular music culture and youth style" (45-6). Finally, the cross-over of disco culture of the 1970s significantly contributed to the black superstars' position on the music scene. As Reebee Garofalo argues, "The slogan 'disco sucks' . . . was as much a racial epithet as it was a statement of musical preference" (81). The catchphrase, invented by the Detroit rock radio DJ Steve Dahl in 1979, expressed the anxiety—looming large especially in the Midwest—that black and gay disco culture was the white masculinist rock music of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. In addition, as Tim Lawrence convincingly argues, disco culture gradually "queered the dance floor." Most conspicuously visible in "disco's break with traditional couples dancing as the basis of social dance," according to Lawrence, the process of queering can be also traced in its recasting of "the dancing body as a site of affective intensities that underpins a form of collective sociality" as well as "the alternative experience of temporality and space on the dance floor" and "the destabilizing impact of a range of dance floor technologies" (230).

Although these factors definitely made Prince's and Jackson's personas more readily and popularly accepted, the moment of their emergence—the turn of the 1980s—witnessed a reactionary backlash against the gender-bending challenges of the 1960s and 1970s and marked the rise of "hard bodies" (Jeffords 13). The history of black masculinities is even more complex; such virilized representations actually predated

1 We would like to acknowledge the helpful assistance of Mirosław Miernik and Filip Lipiński, whose insightful comments have meaningfully enriched our article.

2 The question of its significance for black culture is more problematic, yet in order to cross-over, the black stars had to "first sell well in the black market" (Garofalo 81), which suggests that they had a powerful impact on the black community as well.

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the 1980s since "radical militant resistance to white supremacy, typified by the sixties and seventies black power movements called out of the shadow of repression the black male body, claiming it as a site of hypermasculine power, agency, and sexual potency" (hooks 128). In the 1970s, blaxploitation cinema populated the US visual imagination with black urban superheroes. As the cover story of 1972 *Newsweek* announced, "'bad-ass niggers' are collecting dues with a vengeance" (qtd. in Wiegman 173). As Robyn Wiegman argues, "by the end of the decade [1970s], African American male stars were increasingly finding themselves the twilight figures in interracial male bonding films" (Wiegman 173). Although these images were much more contained and less assertive that the street-smart heroes of blaxploitation, visually their characters continued the tradition of hard bodies. Thus, the campy transgressions of Prince and Jackson stand in stark contrast to the dominant images of both white and black masculinity of the day such as the muscular bodies of Rocky and his black opponent Apollo Creed (Jeffords 34) or "the big black body" of Michael Jordan (Dyson 74).

What is more, by publicizing their androgenized vulnerability, Michael Jackson and Prince use the female masquerade's spectacle of the body, inscribing themselves into the figure of the tormented female diva (rather than, as A. Ross argues, "black female assertiveness" and "the snap queens"), epitomized by such performers as Billie Holliday, Lena Horne, and, more contemporarily, Diana Ross and Whitney Houston. In the early 1980s, Houston looked much like Michael Jackson and her 1983 debut album *Whitney Houston* marked her transition from gospel into pop. Jackson's look can also be likened to Diana Ross, in whose 1981 *TV Special Show*, the two of them synch-danced, wearing identical white suits, black sequin-studded shirts and satin bowties. Cross-racially, Jackson's and Prince's personas can be linked to the glamorous yet fragile white female icons, such as Judy Garland, *Cabaret*'s Lisa Minelli, and, again more contemporarily, to Lady Diana. Camp aesthetics then allowed Jackson and Prince to perform their black bodies in a way that was inaccessible to them otherwise. They were not Baldwin-like sissies; they were artists who—using diva imagery—manipulated gender and race to achieve a profoundly ambiguous effect.

Focusing mostly on Michael Jackson's album *Thriller* (1982) and Prince's film production *Purple Rain* (1984), we will discuss the ways in which their campy transgressions undermine an essentialized notion of black masculinity. In their self-fashionings and musical output, the two musicians traverse various cultural and social boundaries. They draw from musical traditions coded both black (Soul or Funk) and white (Glam Rock, Rock'n'Roll, Pop). Their slender bodies are deeply androgynous, combining both traditionally female and male characteristics. Sexually, their performances are de-Oedipalized. In the case of Michael Jackson, the result is a Peter Pan-like eternal adolescent who never makes his final identification as either heterosexual or LGBTQ desiring agent. Prince's *Purple Rain* character, on the other hand, analogously refuses to assume the patriarchal position of the Father. Yet eventually, he transcends the juvenile and narcissistic position of "the Kid" and in its stead offers a utopian fantasy that idealistically combines the masculine and the feminine in the eponymous image of the "purple rain." Both Jackson and Prince cross the class lines, aspiring not only to the upper-class, but particularly to the haughty aristocracy, which is visible already in their names (Prince)[3] and terms of reference and forms of address whose use they encourage (His Royal Badness, His Purple Highness, and the King of Pop[4]). As Cynthia Green states, "[f]or at least a generation, Prince has been synonymous with purple. Throughout history, the rarity of the color associated it with royalty." As all US fascinations with aristocratic traditions necessarily appropriate European imagery, Prince's and Jackson's royal borrowings necessarily follow a trans-Atlantic trajectory. Finally, a feature that is central to our text and this special issue, and which is surprisingly frequently neglected in critical texts on the two musicians, are their transgressions across the colour line. In the early 1980s, both Prince and Jackson self-fashion their bodies as racially ambiguous and set them in the context of racially mixed settings. As a result, when their campy representations are specifically analysed in the context of black culture, their liberatory potential can be seen in the ways in which they creatively widen the range of black masculinities and imaginatively rebel against the regime of racial authenticity. Nevertheless,

3 Prince was named by his parents as Prince Rogers Nelson, but he chose to use just the first item as his stage name.

4 Additionally, Jackson was married to Lisa Presley, the daughter of the King of Rock, fathering two sons named Prince.

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Prince's and Jackson's transgressions were frequently perceived as apolitical and easily commodifiable,[5] which may account for their enormous popularity and the life-long status of superstars. Along similar lines, both musicians' wide popularity might stem from their de-Oedipalized or asexual characteristics that are still much more palatable in the US than sexually assertive black masculinity. Despite these possible reactionary elements in their mainstream reception, the creative and emancipatory camp aesthetics of Prince and Jackson is continued by many contemporary black performers, including representatives of Queercore such as Mykki Blanco or the Atlanta-based artist collective Wondaland featuring musicians such as Janelle Monáe, Jidenna, or Roman GianArthur, whom we will briefly discuss in the coda to the article.

Thriller

The 1980s mark a transformative period for Michael Jackson. Within that decade, Jackson traversed the way from a "black soul artist" (Mercer 301) to the King of Pop. He also dramatically changed his look, from the dark-skinned youth of the 1979 *Off the Wall* to the effeminate Caucasian of the 1989 *Bad*.[6] It was also in the early 1980s that he rose to the status of a megastar, after the release of "Thriller," the video which "shattered the race barrier on MTV"[7] and was the first clip ever to be inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress for being "culturally, historically [and] aesthetically significant." The fourteen-minute long video-clip revolutionised the industry by welding music with the image. As we will see, in his video-clips for *Thriller*, Jackson employed a camp aesthetic that allowed him to transgress the received representations of the black male body and which proved profoundly resonant with a cross-ethnic audience. In accord with Sontag's statement that "the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (54), it might seem that Jackson's employment of camp has produced a merely escapist effect by detaching the black male body from history. Yet, the cultural resonance of predominantly three songs from the album—"Thriller," "Beat It," and "Billie Jean"—put *Thriller*'s aesthetic and poetic strategies at the heart of the discourse on the representation of the black masculine body. In this section of the article, we explore Jackson's employment of camp mostly in the three above mentioned songs to demonstrate Jackson's ingenious yet problematic challenging of the cultural scripts concerning black masculinity.

The album *Thriller* contains nine songs, out of which "Thriller," "Beat It," and "Billie Jean" remain among the most celebrated achievements in the music industry. Within the album's structure, they are set against the background of five love songs ("Baby Be Mine," "The Girl is Mine," "Human Nature," "The Lady is Mine," "P.Y.T.") that mellow the Jackson persona, placing him within the world of an adolescent romantic fantasy and European refinement. "The Girl is Mine," for example, is sung with Paul McCartney, a white music megastar and British naturalized aristocrat, knighted by the Queen. Finally, the feverish "Wanna Be Startin' Something," with the unsettling "You're a vegetable/You're a buffet/They'll eat off you" lines and the concluding chant of "Mama-say mama-sah ma-ma-coo-sah," borrowed from the Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango, can be construed as engaging in the questions of representation and black masculinity.

If we approach *Thriller* as a concept album that addresses the question of black masculinity, then we are left with a mixed message of innocence, vulnerability, agency, displacement, and contradiction. Within the album's structure, Jackson creates a campy child-like persona that, on the one hand, manipulates the

5 See, for example, *The Rolling Stone*'s review of *Thriller*: "And the title song, which at first sounds like a metaphoric examination of the same under-siege mentality that marks the LP's best moments, instead degenerates into silly camp."

6 At the same time, *Off the Wall* marked Jackson's departure from Motown Records to Epic Records.

7 Until today, *Thriller* remains the world's best-selling album. Already in 1982, *New York Time*'s John Rockwell described it as a "wonderful pop record" and the most "hopeful sign" to date that "the destructive barriers that spring up regularly between white and black music—and between whites and blacks—in this culture may be breached once again." He also stated that "Jackson's appeal is so wide, however, that white publications and radio stations that normally avoid ''black music'' seem willing to pretend he isn't black after all. On one level, that's admirable, in that color distinctions are often best avoided altogether. But Mr. Jackson is black, and while he sings a duet here with Paul McCartney, enlists Eddie Van Halen for a guitar solo and observes no color exclusivity in his choice of backup musicians, he still works honorably within the context of contemporary black popular music at its fervent, eclectic best." Rockwell thus emphasises both the cultural resonance and the pan-racial character of Jackson's album.

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stereotypes concerning the black male body and, at the same time, crosses over to white iconography and fantasy world, drawing on the traditions of, for example, the film *noir* and the musical. What is more, Jackson's referencing the musical allows him to challenge both racial authenticity and colonial mimicry by creatively employing tropes coded as white and feminine. In "Masculinity as Spectacle," Steve Neale notes that the musical is "the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way," which connotatively feminises its male characters (18). By employing camp within the genre of the musical and alluding to the white, slender-bodied Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, to the latter of whom he dedicated his 1988 autobiography *Moonwalk*, Jackson is able to use an aesthetic and poetic of excess in a way that, arguably, would have been inaccessible to him in any other way.

On the visual, poetic, and musical planes, *Thriller* is eclectic, drawing from a vast repertoire of cultural topes. In "Beat It," by a campy employment of the black gangsta tropes, Jackson stages a pastiche of the blaxploitation iconography, as he deflates conflict and brings reconciliation across racial lines *via* music. In "Thriller," by leading a multi-ethnic zombie synch-dance, he defies the nationalistic ideology of the Black Power movement. In "Billie Jean," the film-*noir*-stylized, highly theatrical scenario allows him to cross over to the poetics of the white male protagonist, cornered by a *femme fatale*. Astonishingly, within the video's logic, this male can save himself from persecution through his super-power ability to disappear. By weaving elements of the supernatural or fantastic into the clips for "Thriller" and "Billie Jean" and featuring himself as a multi-ethnic unifier in "Beat It," Jackson crafts a unique persona, both "off the wall" and "thrilling." Unlike Prince in *The Purple Rain*, he does not stage an overtly Oedipal context; he rather heads towards a scenario of a desexualised multi-racial utopia. In doing so, he adopts a chameleon-like persona who can transcend all divisions with his supreme charisma and charm.[8]

Significantly, the persona that Jackson adopted in *Thriller*, and which he later intensively developed, is based on a set of contradictions. They produce a powerful effect of displacement, circulating around the poles of power and vulnerability. *Rolling Stone*'s Christopher Connelly's description of *Thriller* as "zesty" and "harrowing" is reinforced by the photo on the album's gatefold sleeve, featuring Jackson with a tiger cub at his feet (a pet or a predator?). Jackson's physical transformation sends a similarly mixed message. In his analysis of "Thriller," Kobena Mercer describes the 1980s Jackson as "[n]either child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine," who "looks more like Diana Ross than any other black male soul artist" (302, 301). By the time of *Thriller*'s release, Jackson had already moved from an Afro hairdo to a permed curls wet-look with a single lock of hair on his forehead. His complexion had become paler and his nose slimmer. He had also adopted a unique, highly stylized dressing style: ankle-cut trousers, pristine white or diamond-studded socks and a single shimmering glove. Soon, his public persona was to become even more eccentric and structurally confused. He adopted "a more white, European look" (Mercer 301), while never renouncing his black identity. Around the mid-1980s, Jackson started wearing heavily ornamented military-like uniforms with extensive golden buttons, tassels, belts and trousers bands. Concurrently, he began to tape his fingers—as if he was permanently injured—and to display an alternatively black, white, red or glittering band on his arm: a signifier of a perpetual, yet carnivalesque, mourning. We will return to these semantically and affectively contradictory tensions in the concluding part of this article.

In the 1980s, the visual confusion of the carnival and mourning was accompanied by Jackson's performances of sexual ambivalence, executed both on stage and in video-clips. The recurrent crotch-grabbing and fricative movements have become his trademarks. They clashed with Jackson's "breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs and other wordless sounds" (Mercer 300), delivered in a pre-puberty voice pitch. Already in 1979, *Rolling Stone*'s Stephen Holden described the 21-year-old Jackson's voice as "daringly used," "feathery-timbered" tenor that "slides smoothly into a startling falsetto" to produce an "ultradramatic phrasing." The insistent contradictory extremities—the white look vs. the declared black identity, the carnivalesque *and* marked with injury or mourning dress code, the sexually provocative

8 Already in 1978, Jackson crossed over to the world of the white fairy-tale, starring as Scarecrow in the African American film remake of the musical *The Wiz*, with Diana Ross starring as Dorothy.

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yet pre-puberty innocent performing mode—fail to find a resolution, which, according to Mercer, deems Jackson a "social hieroglyph," demanding, yet defying, decoding (302).[9]

Since "Thriller" is the song and clip that proved the most resonant, we will examine it in closer detail. Released fifteen years after *The Night of the Living Dead* and seven years after the camp classic *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it features a story-within-a-story-within-a-story: "a parody of [a] 1950s B-movie horror" and "a pastiche [of the] 1950s retro style" (Mercer 308). Set in an aesthetic of the 1950s white middle class, a pink-frocked girl and a boy-next-door-like Michael Jackson run out of gas in the middle of the night, prompting the Jackson-character to propose to the girl to go steady by assuring her that "he is not like other guys." Suddenly, the full-mooned sky gets cloudy and the cute Jackson-character turns into a cat-wolf. This story, however, turns out to be just a film watched in a cinema named Palace by an audience including a character played yet again by Jackson and his "real" girlfriend, who, frightened by the film, leaves the cinema, and is followed by her amused boyfriend. He playfully teases her in front of the cinema and the two walk until they find themselves in a cemetery, surrounded by walking corpses, arisen from the graves. Suddenly, Jackson joins them, and they perform an extremely elaborate group dance routine. When the girl is probably about to be killed, she wakes up, tapped by her boyfriend, yet again played by Jackson. The video-clip ends with a viciously smiling face of Jackson, whose eyes flash with an evil look.

There are several factors through which camp operates in "Thriller." The over-the-top narrative device of tripling the Jackson-character defers mimetic claims, while inadvertently exposing the viewers' fantasies (one by one, Jackson's characters turn out to be products of the imaginary). The rapping voiceover that exercises a distinguished "British" accent belongs to Vincent Price, a well-established white American actor, renowned for his campy performances in horror films, mostly Edgar Allan Poe's adaptations. He also performed as Oscar Wilde in the one-man stage play *Diversions and Delight*s, hosted a BBC radio program *The Price of Fear*, appeared in children's television program *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*, and finally, did the voiceover on Alice Cooper's *Welcome to My Nightmare*. The sound effects such as a creaking door, feet walking on wooden planks, the sounds of thunder and wind, and the howling dogs add to the aesthetic excess of the clip, producing an eerie effect of camped-up Gothicism.

There is also much sexual ambiguity involved, which largely de-Oedipalizes the romantic subplot of "Thriller" and further intensifies the effect of the artifice. In accordance with Sontag's claim that camp is "the triumph of the epicene style" (56), the Jackson character is full of unresolved tension concerning both his gender and sexual preferences, as the pitch of his voice is indistinguishable from the girl's and his persona is rendered more innocent then hers (the actress Ola Ray was *Playboy*'s June 1980 Playmate of the Month, a fact that some of the American audiences could be familiar with). The letter "M" embroidered on Jackson's blouse solidifies confusion: Michael, monster, macho, Mickey Mouse or Hitchcock's *M is for Murder* are among the possible tropes. Finally, his words "I'm not like other guys," paired with his decision to "thrill" his girlfriend by performing a group dance with zombies allow Jackson to challenge the horizon of the black male representation. The *double entendre* of the word "to thrill," exploited in the lyrics ("Girl, I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try . . . so / So let me hold you tight and share a killer, thriller, ow! . . .For no mere mortal can resist / The evil of the thriller"), amplify the camp character of his performance, or, in the words of Sontag, make the "flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation [and] gestures full of duplicity" (56). Jackson turns out to be simultaneously a gangsta and a

9 An unresolved tension between strength and vulnerability informs Jackson's later productions. In "Bad," he sings: "I'm bad, I'm smooth"; the same tension is visible in "Smooth Criminal." The more he visually detached himself from stereotypical black masculinity, the more military and epic were his albums' titles. From 1979 to 2001, the trajectory runs as follows: *Off the Wall* (1979), *Thriller* (1982), *Bad* (1989), *Dangerous* (1991), *HIStory*, Book 1: *Invincible* (2001). Yet, the split between power and vulnerability is reflected in the titles of the songs: *Invincible* features the following songs: "Unbreakable," "Heartbreaker," "Invincible," "Cry (You Can Change the World)," "The Lost Children" and "Threatened."

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diva, and a brother from another planet,[10] exercising features of an effeminate drag-king and a bracketed black brute at once, while transgressing both of them.

Camp is also an apt vehicle to inadvertently address the traumatized areas of American history. In the video, the gang of ethnically-mixed zombies displays signs usually associated with the upper class or maybe even aristocracy. Their carefully stylized dresses, pearls, high heels, ties, and suits make up for a highly over-aestheticized pastiche of a horror movie and a bitter comment on American racial history. Wearing a campy variation of the black face—a deadly blueish whiteface—the white aristocracy follow Jackson's lead, synch-dancing his extremely elaborate routine. It would seem that, in "Thriller," Jackson signifies on the tradition of cakewalk while staging a campy reversal of the minstrel show: an African-American youth resuscitates white aristocracy to make them dance to his music and copy his movements. The lyrics "the dead start to walk in their masquerade" echo Ross's observation that "'x' becomes camp, because of its historical association with a power that is now in decline" (140). More than that, as Sontag argues, "the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned" as "the process of ageing . . . provides the necessary detachment" and liberates "the work of art from moral relevance" (60). This temporal deferral allows "Thriller" to blur the carnival with eschatology and, within a camp framework, treat props of the past as glamorous gadgets rather than yielding in the historical drama of slavery, while inadvertently acknowledging their compliance.

Jackson's employment of camp, in different registers, extends to the other two songs and video-clips. Like "Thriller," the clip for "Billie Jean" exercises a strong aesthetic excess, executed through Jackson's trips towards the imagery of the film *noir* and his employment of the supernatural and fantastic. Feeding into the de-Oedipalization of Jackson's persona, the narrative exploits the motif of a false paternity claim, rendering the spectre-like Jackson radically displaced: both fatherless and not willing to father. Interestingly, the story plot repeats the "Thriller" motif of Jackson, rejuvenating the white, as he throws a magic coin into a white male beggar's cup. The theatrical set-up of a ghost-town, placed in the middle of nowhere, like a blatant piece of scenography located on a desert planet, reinforces the fantastic and artificial character of Jackson's performing persona.

Historically, the supernatural character of Jackson's persona was enhanced in his numerous productions of the 1980s. At the 1982 Grammy Awards, Jackson debuted his signature dance move, the moonwalk. Dancing to the tune of "Billie Jean" in a distinctive black-sequined jacket and a golf glove decorated with rhinestones, he seemed to defy the laws of physics, moonwalking across the stage. In 1983, the artist gave voice to an audiobook based on Spielberg's 1982 blockbuster *E.T. the Extra-Terrestial,* one of Jackson's favourite films.[11] In 1989, fantastic elements became central in Jackson's *Moonwalker*, a fantasy film made up of largely disconnected mini-narratives, featuring a children's friend Jackson transforming himself into a giant robot. *Moonwalker* also contains an extended video for "Smooth Criminal," in which Jackson, dressed in a pristine white suit and a hat, defies gravity (and also uses a magic coin) in a scenario of what appears to be a 1920s or 1930s café, full of men in zoot suits and oriental-looking women. The escapist potential of perpetual childhood's fantasy world, executed in a campy mode, has become a defining feature for Jackson as an eternal Peter Pan, or Wacko Jack, who resides in Neverland.

Jackson's first successful Rock cross-over "Beat It" also displays a variety of campy strategies. Described in 1984 by Jay Cocks as an "asphalt aria," the song and video is Jackson's tribute to *West Side Story* and to the musical genre in general. The fact that *West Side Story* retells the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

10 The narrative of cultural displacement, addressed through the elements of the fantastic, was exploited in numerous productions preceding or contemporaneous to *Thriller*. The direct inspiration for the video "Thriller" was John Landis's 1981 film *An American Werewolf in London*. In the 1968 zombie apocalypse *The Night of the Walking Dead*, an African American character saves the remaining handful of survivors. An extraterrestrial subplot is featured in *The Man who Fell to Earth* (1976), starring David Bowie, following his album *Space Oddity* (1969). In 1984, the Afrofuturist film *The Brother from Another Planet* featured a black protagonist persecuted by outer-space villains. Afrofuturism is closely related to black camp and is a central element in the universe created by the Wondaland artists, which we will discuss in the concluding part of the article.

11 Interestingly, Alice Walker allowed Spielberg to direct a film adaptation of *Color Purple* only after watching *E.T.* She believed that since he was capable of empathy for an alien, he would be able to sympathise with an African American woman. Quincy Jones, Jackson's main collaborator at the time, co-produced and wrote music for the Spielberg-directed *Color Purple*.

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marks "Beat It" as universalising the questions of conflict, death and reconciliation. In his article, Andrew Ross claims that the gangsta is validated by the fact that he comes from the ghetto, yet Jackson's persona in "Beat It" undermines this traditional black gangsta figure. The artist features a cute and fragile gangsta character, alienated from the crowd. The solitary Jackson wears white socks and a red, diamond-studded leather jacket that clash with the "serious," sombre-looking outfits of the other (multi-ethnic) characters. The elaborate footwork he performs, and which both conflicted gangs eventually follow, can be specifically linked with Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, whose tap dance historically originated from the black culture's tap dance. As Mercer recounts, in "Beat It," the Jackson character "disarms the gangs with superior charm and grace as he leads the all-male cast through a dance sequence" (302). Jackson's character then deflates the "elaborately staged rituals of conflict between men" (Cohan and Hark 3), depoliticising them by reducing them to a performative *jouissance* and thus rendering a scenario of a post-racial utopia.

In the three pieces discussed above, Jackson transgresses race and gender when viewed from a normative point of view. Apart from camping the tropes that had already been present in the representations of black men, Jackson crosses over to the visual and semantic repertoire of the refined European whiteness and aristocracy, which he merges with the aesthetics of the white fairy tale. More specifically, Michael Jackson, arrested in the pre-Oedipal fantasy of omnipotence, does not confront paternal figures. His sexual agency is deflated by his high-pitched voice and compulsive crotch-grabbing, subjected to the theatrical and growingly conventionalized dance routine. His gradually more pronounced detachment from the black masculine body is based on contradiction and reaching out to the fantastic and perpetually young. In that, Jackson tragically replicates the "life as art" paradigm of Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray* by remaining arrested in the world of perpetual adolescence (that is, refusing to take up a position of a grown-up black male). Instead, he lingers in a beyond life-and-death limbo and a deracialized fairy-tale fantasy.

Purple Rain

In 1984, the soundtrack for his movie *Purple Rain*, as one of the many consensual reviewers argued, "turned Prince into a global superstar" (George). As another critic states, the film, in turn, was "the flashiest album cover ever to be released as a movie," and he describes Prince's screen performance as a "riveting spectacle" (Canby). The film is centrally preoccupied with models, representations, and reinventions of black masculinity. The main character of *Purple Rain*, a musician named the Kid, both played by Prince and modelled on Prince's persona, is juxtaposed with two other black male performers, a pop musician Morris Day and the Kid's father, Francis L. The two older black men represent alternative models of black masculine self-expression, and thus shed light on the reasons for the choice of camp image rather than other available options, which illuminates the politics of Prince's stylistics. Francis, fashioned after Prince's father who also was a pianist, stands for racial authenticity and performs within the traditionally African American modes of expression. He is a jazz musician, who decides not to compromise his music by fulfilling the demands of the music market. His organic relationship with music is emphasised in the scene where he claims that he does need to write down the notes. "I don't write them down. I don't have to. That is the big difference between you and me," he explains to his son. In this gesture, he links his output to the black oral tradition and improvisation that guarantees authenticity, in contrast to commodified mainstream music.[12] Another way in which he is contrasted with mainstream culture is his refusal to comply with the contemporaneous musical trends. As a result, he is a closeted pianist and plays only in the basement of his own house, next to his son's room. Such a private form of expression correlates with the fact that the father does not produce any public persona, which further reinforces his claims to authenticity. More specifically, Francis's screaming "sinner" at the Kid's mother after her absence from home might link him to the black preaching tradition, additionally emphasising the links to the vernacular tradition and racial authenticity.

Morris Day seems to be the very opposite of the Kid's father. He is interested mostly in the public success of his performance, and his public persona is highly stylized. He represents the path of colonial mimicry,

12 Paradoxically, it turns out that he has written his music down and the Kid discovers the scores towards the end of the movie.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

which imperfectly mimics the style of successful American mainstream celebrities. He slurps when drinking champagne and wears flashy shiny business suits with exotic prints, shirts, and ties. He unsuccessfully brags about having "a brass water bed" and "an Italian cook Gino Sesacagrattchi or something like that." His musical choices are not grounded in the black vernacular tradition; what he is interested in is simply satisfying the market demand. According to the film's script, Morris "headlines a slick techno-funk group called THE TIME which sports gangster suits and wide-brimmed hats." Even if the band's outfits are read as a reference to the African American and Latino zoot suit culture rather than colonial mimicry—or more accurately, interpreted as colonial mimicry of the dominant aesthetics that has appropriated minority zoot suit style—"techno-funk" as a fundamentally electronic genre stands in symbolic opposition both to jazz's vernacular roots in general and Francis L.'s purely acoustic music in particular (according to Ryan Doherty, "[w]hen music is labeled acoustic, unplugged, or unwired, the assumption seems to be that other types of music are cluttered by technology and overproduction and therefore aren't as pure"). Morris's preoccupation with popularity, though highlighted throughout the film, is most conspicuously visible in his marketing of a girls' band, which is racially mixed and clearly exploits the sexual appeal of the girls. Apollonia 6—whose lead singer is the Kid's girlfriend Apollonia—is a trio formed of two racially ambiguous women and a white blonde. Their performance fulfils a heteronormative masculine fantasy of curved women, suggestively dancing in lingerie. Singing the "Sex Shooter" number, they make inviting gestures towards the audience, interpolating specifically men with "[c]ome on, boy" and promising to "[b]e your slave / do anything I'm told."[13] Significantly, Morris Day completely controls their form of expression; they cannot dance to their own steps, and he does not even want to look at their own choreography. Morris Day is the Kid's foil, the villain that does not have the sympathy of the film's narrative. He is represented as greedy, and his stylized stage persona is ridiculed. This is evident at the very beginning of the film when—before putting on his flashy suits—he vacuums his apartment in a bandana. It is wrapped in a grotesque way that strongly reminds of the stereotypical mammy image, which connotatively marks him with emasculation and slavery. Moreover, although at first the flamboyant style of his "sports gangster suits and wide-brimmed hats" might seem as excessive as the Kid's persona, from the perspective of camp aesthetics—in a stark contrast to the very fluid boundary between the Kid on stage, the Kid in private, and Prince—Morris Day has to dress up as Morris Day the artist and mask his real self, depicted as pathetic in the film.

Despite the crucial difference in the stylistics of Morris Day and the Kid's father, their characters share one significant narrative element: both are violent towards women. The Kid's father is an abusive husband, and metonymically his persona becomes an embodiment of abuse in the scene when the Kid is violent towards his girlfriend Apollonia, which is highlighted with a jazz melody in the soundtrack. Analogously, in one of the first glimpses of Morris Day, he has his sidekick friend throw his racially ambiguous ex-lover into a garbage can. Morris Day's misogynist and objectifying attitude towards women is indicated throughout the film in such an exaggerated fashion, which neatly correlates with his conspicuous colonial mimicry pose. Significantly, all the female characters in these abusive relationships are racially ambiguous. The Kid's mother is played by a Greek-American, dark-hair, and dark-complexioned actress, Olga Karlatos, while Mexican-American Apollonia Kotero—the lead singer of the actual Apollonia 6—is cast as his girlfriend. Sandra Gershman's minor character, who ends up among garbage and is referred in the credits as "Beautiful Babe," analogously is a dark-eyed brunette with dark complexion. Thus, the film does not position dark-skinned black women either as objects of masculine violence or masculine desire.

Prince opposes these violent acts in the narrative, yet he does not defeat his father in order to assume the position of the Father but eventually de-Oedipalizes himself instead. He tries to defend his mother

13 Even though in the film's narrative, Morris Day is clearly positioned as the Kid's chief opponent, extratextually, both The Time and Apollonia 6 were in fact put together and produced by Prince. As this article focuses on the film, in the analysis Morris Day is read as the narrative's main villain. In *Purple Rain*, Apollonia 6's performance is positioned as the Kid's competition as well: "Morris is squeezing you, kiddo," says the club owner to the Kid after the girls band's successful concert. Despite that, it must be admitted that both The Time and Apollonia 6 are popular with the club's audience and though both are positioned as pandering to the people's taste, the film's narrative is not critical of either The Time or Apollonia 6's music. Thus, the film solves the discrepancy between its narrative positioning of the bands and the extratextual fact that Prince was responsible for all original songs in *Purple Rain*.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

and not to perpetuate the pathological scenario of family violence in the relationship with his girlfriend, Apollonia. There are, nevertheless, several scenes that represent the Kid as violent towards her: he hits her more than once, as we have mentioned, and is openly aggressive or forceful in several other cases. The narrative's central movement thus is the Kid's struggle to exorcise this violent drive. His effort not to replicate his father's oppressive behaviour results in his reluctance to enter relationships with women. The extent to which violence and sexual relations are intertwined for the Kid is aptly illustrated with one of his songs in the film. As "the Woman's VOICE begins to moan deeply, pleasurably," Apollonia asks him, "[w]ho's the lucky girl? Sounds like she was having a good time." "She's crying – it's backwards," the Kid responds (Magnoli).[14] Due to his family history, for the Kid, violence towards women and heterosexual intimacy are just two sides of the same coin, so in order not to be violent he seems to eschew any closer relationships with women. In a scene from the script that did not make it into the final cut, the waitress named Jill looks at the Kid in a way that makes her friend Kim say, "Honey, you still chasing after that fool? . . . He doesn't even look at you. That's the last thing you want from a man" (Magnoli). Kim's assumption is ambiguous—either the Kid is a fool and is not regarded as an ideal partner for any woman or he is not regarded as an ideal partner for Jill. Kim, however, might also be suggesting that he is not interested in women generally. Such public perception of the Kid's sexuality is reinforced in the scene when Morris Day calls him a "long-haired fag." Needless to say, in the script and the film the Kid "barely acknowledges Jill" (Magnoli).

His affair with Apollonia also initially exemplifies his reluctance to enter relationships with women and—which is especially visible in the script—it is Apollonia who is the desiring agent, and the Kid is the object of sexual gaze in the film. During their first meeting, the Kid's desire for Apollonia is almost unmentioned. In contrast, "his effect on her is instantaneous. Passion surges through her like a tidal wave. His hair, face, eyes—it all conspires to make her weak." The subsequent lines—"PRINCE[15] watches Morris a moment, then eyes [Apollonia] again. The heat between them is apparent"—depict their infatuation as mutual, yet they are followed again with a focus on Apollonia's desire: her "heart is pounding, she's not sure what to do" (Magnoli). The first time the script depicts the Kid's desire for Apollonia is when she is about to dive into a cold lake. "Her hold on him is unmistakable. She pulls off her blouse in one fluid motion, tugs off her boots, drops her pants to the ground. She's exquisite, takes a step toward him," and as a result, "Passion rings in his veins" (Magnoli). Yet—his reaction to this "passion" forms one of the most unanticipated scenes in the film. Instead of acting upon his desire, the Kid "jumps on his motorcycle, STARTS it up. He laughs heartily, wants to *kid* her, rides down the road as if he's leaving" (Magnoli; emphasis added). In the scene, he clearly withdraws from the path towards the position of the Father, and thus it can be read as a further example of Prince's queer de-Oedipalization as discussed by Walser. The regressive and juvenile character of his action is highlighted by the fact that he wants to "kid" Apollonia. Nevertheless, just as the scene finally ends in his return to the furious, wet, and cold Apollonia on his bike, the film does eventually represent their intimate encounter.

Yet, again, it is both initiated by Apollonia, and it is her desire that is foregrounded in the script: "[h]eat floods into her womb like soft fire." "She touches his chest delicately, fluffs up his hair," and says "King Kong," referring to his chest. Additionally, in the script, he stops her twice, when "she goes to remove her dress," which is not visible in the final film version, where the whole scene is cut short. Nevertheless, the final-cut is quite explicit and depicts a normatively heterosexual act. The relationship is broken off due to the Kid's violence and his jealousy of Apollonia's performances in lingerie that remind the viewer of his father's shouts "Sinner" at the mother. The couple finally reconciles after the Kid's father's suicide and his own masterful performance of "Purple Rain." It seems that the song lyrics "I never meant to cause you any sorrow / I never meant to cause you any pain / I only wanted to one time to see you laughing / I only wanted to see you / Laughing in the purple rain" are directed to Apollonia. Later in the song, the Kid promises

14 All emphasis marked with capital letters is in the original script.

15 The fact that "Prince" is used in the script instead of the Kid demonstrates the complex biographical investment of the narrative and the blurred boundary between Prince, Prince Rogers Nelson, the Kid the son of Francis L., and the Kid the musician in the film, which, we argue, is directly related to its camp aesthetics.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

change: "I know times are changing / It's time we all reach out / For something new." Allegedly, Prince explained the puzzling notion of "purple rain" in the following way: "When there's blood in the sky—red and blue = purple . . . purple rain pertains to the end of the world and being with the one you love and letting your faith/god guide you through the purple rain" (Jones). Thus, purple emerges as a harmonious combination of the traditionally masculine blue and the feminine red. Additionally, it is positioned in the context of heaven and god, which gives it a transcendental, delivering quality. This reading matches the construction of the famous sign ""—frequently referred to as the "Love Symbol"—that combines the male and the female symbols.[16] Thus, the film's closure promises a new kind of human relationship that transcends the Oedipal scenario.

Analogously to his struggle against the Father figure, the Kid defeats Morris Day in their musical rivalry with his concert performance of "Purple Rain." Significantly, even before the film's finale, the villain ends up on a pile of garbage, which parallels his own, earlier-mentioned, behaviour towards a woman. In fact, most of the film's narrative is driven by the Kid's attempts, on the one hand, not to repeat his father's professional failure, which caused his frustration and compensatory domestic violence, and, on the other, not to pursue the path of Morris Day's musical performance, which simply answers market demand. This struggle not to follow the imposed models of black male adulthood is suggested in the name "the Kid." Also Kiddo or Junior, it is used ambiguously in the film to refer to his relationship with the father artist and to his arriviste position on the music scene. The Kid tries to overcome the anxiety of influence and to defeat the two role models in the film. As Robert Walser convincingly argues, the movie is about "one kind of de-Oedipalization, the struggle over the social reproduction of patriarchy" (79).

The Kid's de-Oedipalization is visible in his refusal to assume the adult post-Oedipal identity but also in his campy persona that defies traditional gender and racial expectations. From the normative perspective of Morris, as we have mentioned, he is just a "long-haired fag." The Kid, in contrast, seems to suspend all normative expectations. For example, when he jealously asks Apollonia, who gave her the ankle bracelet, he wonders if it was a "he or a she." That campy artifice is a defining feature of his character is visible already in the way the Kid is structurally positioned in the narrative. On the one hand, it is an autobiographical film, and on the other, the Kid is the only performing character whose name is changed, which highlights strategic construction of Prince's public image.

As A. Ross argues, the camp effect is created when certain grandeur of the past, which "lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings" and yet is available in the present, becomes reused and redefined ("Uses of Camp" 312). The Kid's stylistic appropriations aptly illustrate this claim. *Purple Rain*'s main character, in many scenes, is dressed in a purple coat and wears a high hairdo that uncannily resembles Saint-Exupery's drawings of the little Prince (yet another reference that highlights his refusal to assume the normative Oedipal position), whereas Apollonia's main attire in the film is a long shiny black cape. These royal connotations, together with the omnipresence of the colour purple and Prince's name, form a strong connection to the camp tradition and its close kin and predecessor—dandyism. As Sontag argues camp is "an aristocratic posture with relation to culture" (63), and A. Ross agrees that "[p]seudo-aristocratic patrilineage of camp can hardly be understated" ("Uses of Camp" 315). Prince's aristocratic stylization is updated with some high-tech, sci-fi glittering elements, mirror glasses, high-heeled shoes, and simultaneously it is roughened with a beard, a studded belt, leather clothes, metal chains, and a motorbike. It is a mixture of white aristocratic imagery transplanted from Europe, made readily available through book illustrations, and frequently coded as feminine with very modern, almost industrial stylistics and selected signifiers of American hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, in the whole film the Kid is either presented topless or overdressed in the above-mentioned manner, which parallels traditional stylistics of Anglo-American representations of women and thus connotatively feminises his persona. What further underlines the Kid's gender-bending character is the fact that other band members and people in the audience, both male and female, wear similar outfits and make-up.

Significantly, the Kid never changes before performances. His stage clothes constitute his casual attire. This is paralleled by very similar decoration of his room and his dressing-room in the club. The

16 Prince used it as his stage name between 1993 and 2000 due to a dispute with Warner Bros.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

Kid's stage persona cannot be distinguished either from his non-performing self or from Prince's public self-fashioning. The Kid the performer, the real-life Kid, and Prince are conflated into one palimpsestuous "riveting" image. The artifice of this multifaceted personage is dramatically highlighted when after the concert the Kid, dressed in his aristocratically inspired, lavish clothes comes back home. Instead of the phantasmagorical places from his song lyrics, such as mansions and castles, which as Walser argues are examples of deterritorializations as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (84) and which evoke associations with the white European leisure class of the past, he lives in his parents' basement in a white siding house in the American Midwest suburbs. As Albert Magnoli puts it in his script, it is "a neat and tidy, homogeneous, lower middle-class neighborhood whose occupants are hard-working type fiercely protective of their privacy." This contrast makes the campiness of the Kid's performance in the film conspicuous since it highlights the artificiality of different layers of Prince's persona.

This dramatic cross-class, cross-race, cross-Atlantic contrast is mediated through the décor in the Kid's room (and his changing room decorated with elements such as colourful Venetian masks to some extent as well). Its space does not match typical working-class interiors. According to Magnoli, "The entire room looks hand-built, the wood carefully painted, or stained. . . . Various MURALS are painted on the walls, MOBILES are suspended from the ceiling. A bed sits in the middle of the floor, a vanity table and mirror nearby." The Kid produces an unrealistic and romantic atmosphere in the room with an abundance of candles. The candles illuminate large numbers of Unicorns, Pegasuses, Pierrots, and Venetian masks that take up all the shelves and other horizontal surfaces of the musician's room. Instead of the classic image of the American mustang, he chooses European mythological creatures associated with artistic creativity, whose bodies are transgressive mutations because of the added horns and wings. Instead of cowboys, action heroes, boxers, blaxploitation characters, and other emblems of hegemonic or traditional black masculinity, the Kid collects Pierrots, romantic androgynous figures in white-face, which highlights the race transgression in his self-fashioning. Pierrots, on the one hand, are one of the fin-de-siècle icons, which would intertextually link Prince's camp to the tradition of European dandyism. On the other hand, together with Unicorns and Pegasuses, in late-twentieth-century American culture they represent "grandeur of the past" "[which] lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, [and is easily] available, in the present" in the form of commodities decorating teenage girls' rooms. Hence the Kid's décor, on the one hand, suggests imaginary long-distance transatlantic destinations and, on the other, is a gender-bending gesture, appropriating images beloved by American teenage girls.

Another prop that complexly adds to the Kid's transgressive image is his Honda stunt bike. On the one hand, it is a symbol of the "easy rider's" freedom "on the road" and mid-century rebellious American masculinity, and on the other hand, these connotations are undercut by the pink sign of love painted on its purple body, combining the male and the female symbols. The sign reappears also as graffiti on a bridge span in an industrial landscape that Prince roams instead of Route 66. Moreover, the bike has hot pink velour inserts, custom-made by a company called "Drag Specialties," and an ornamental front with what its designer refers to as "a sissy handlebar" ("Prince's *Purple Rain* Honda"). It is an excellent example of what Walser claims is a signature mark of Prince's persona: using "sings and constructions that are coded 'feminine' as recoding of masculinity and sexuality" (84).

Apart from these transgressions of race, class, continent, and gender, the most significant element of the Kid's campy persona is his performance at the end of the film. It takes place after a dramatic scene of his father's failed suicide and the Kid's discovery of his father's music scores in the basement. In the following scene, the Kid gives a performance in a black-owned club for a mixed-race audience. He comes on stage and dedicates the song to his father, which suggests that he will choose to affirm his father's tradition. However, what he does instead is play a song that has been written by two female members of his band the Revolution, which he has refused to sing throughout the film as not his own. Thus intratextually, the song "Purple Rain" is written by two most probably lesbian women—their close relationship is highlighted throughout the film though there is no explicit scene that makes it explicit (in addition, extratextually the women identified in fact as lesbians). Furthermore, the song is given to the Kid through Jill, a waitress in the club, who likes it and encourages the lead musician to play it. Hence, instead of following Morris Day's strategy of commodifying female bodies for profit and his father's unsuccessful performance that leads to compensatory violence

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

against his wife, the Kid affirms female creativity and transgressive desire by performing Lisa and Wendy's song.[17] Hence, there is a multi-layered representation of authorship and performance: the Kid performs the song written by Lisa and Wendy, which is written by Prince. Apart from the song, another significant feminine element in this performance is a guitar he uses for the first time, which is a present from his girlfriend Apollonia. Both the ornamental stylistics of the guitar, which match his royal outfit, and the fact that it is a present from his girlfriend position femininity as an important element of his last and the most successful performance. Significantly, not only is the gig a success that establishes the Kid's position in the club and earns even Morris's respect, but the black people in the audience are more visible than during his previous performances, which demonstrates that racial authenticity and traditionally black modes of expression are not the only way to reach black listeners.

One could go in one more direction when reading the title *Purple Rain*. As we have mentioned, the colour suggests appropriation of royal images and hence mostly constitutes a cross-class masquerade or, alternatively, represents a combination of the feminine and the masculine. On the other hand, the film was released only two years after the publication of Alice Walker's womanist bestseller *The Color Purple*, where the meaning of the colour shifts from the symbol of woman's physical abuse to self-affirmation and is inherently linked to the female-female intimacy between Sugar and Celia. Even if this reference is too-far-fetched, the two above-discussed gifts—the guitar and the song—are enough to show that Prince's most successful performance with a mixed-race audience does not follow the two-main black male performing models and invests his stage reinvention in feminine creativity and generosity in their stead. Hence, despite several scenes that show his struggle with violence towards women throughout the film, in the finale, the Kid defeats his two symbolic fathers, overcomes the anxiety of influence, exorcises the black gangsta brute, and promises deliverance in the purple rain.

Conclusions

In their early 1980s artistic productions, in different ways Michael Jackson and Prince produce eccentric and perplexing personas *vis-à-vis* the dominant representations of both black and hegemonic masculinity of the time. Whereas Jackson stages an utterly de-Oedipalized persona of a pan-racial unifier, Prince's camp masculinity combines the masculine and feminine elements in a way that both de-Oedipalizes his persona and brings a promise of a non-patriarchal relationship between a man and a woman. Both employ the aesthetics of the female masquerade by bracketing their performances with a camp stylistics. Camp, as Sontag points out, is "a mode of seduction" (57), and their performances proved highly seductive with the audience. Yet, as they disrupt the binary paradigms of race and gender and the mappings of racial and sexual difference, the viewer cannot speculatively colonise them.

Contrary to Sontag's belief in camp's apolitical character and in the incompatibility of camp with tragedy—"camp and tragedy are antitheses" (62)—the stakes turn out profound. Through their employment of camp, both Michael Jackson and Prince fashion themselves as dispossessed and unwilling to follow or rework the culturally-available scripts of black masculine adulthood. Prince refutes both racial authenticity and colonial mimicry, whereas Jackson slips into an infantile humanist utopia. Camp serves as a glamorous façade that hides an underlying drama of not being able, at the time, to conjure up an alternative mode of black adult masculinity. As such, their exercising of the camp aesthetic is both liberatory and profoundly tragic. It serves the two artists as a vehicle to remain permanently halted in adolescence, as black adult masculinity presents itself as either threatening and destructive or sycophantic and derivative of the minstrel show. The two artists then are liberatory, for they disrupt the "American grammar book," yet, their performances expose the fact that, as Hortense Spillers notes in her renowned 1987 text, "in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity" (455). Additionally, she contends that the "diasporic plight marked by *a theft of the body*" (457) produces "the ruling episteme," which "remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and

17 Significantly, even though there are some songs on the extratextual *Purple Rain* album that are co-authored by the real-life Lisa and Wendy, only Prince is credited as the author of the title piece.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 2/7/18 1:27 PM

mutilation" (459). The fact that, under the slavery system, African American children were "unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners" (465)[18] serves as a powerful metaphor for displacement that is symbolically entailed on the "remotest posterity" of the slave mother. At the same time, Susan Gubar points out that "blackness [is] still defined as base embodiment" (31). For Michael Jackson and Prince, the employment of camp allows them to move away from received representations of black masculinity and thus not to directly confront themselves with the "orphanization" of the African-American "notorious bastard" (Spillers 65). Camp aesthetics then becomes a strategy to "disremember" (Spillers 76) and, in fact, to inadvertently mourn the impossibility to construct, in the early 1980s, an image of black masculinity that would successfully challenge the symbolic order without resorting to theatricality. As a result, through the use of camp, the two artists remain arrested in an escapist aesthetic of the infantile phantasy of omnipotence that discharges them from the necessity to come up with a post-Oedipal representation of black masculinity. Since, in the early 1980s, black masculinity was subject to even more extensive ideological pressures and physical oppression than it is today, it would seem that, by employing a camp aesthetics, the two artists could mourn what could not be mourned directly: the symbolic and corporeal violence against the black masculine body. This, however, renders them suspended in a state of permanent exile.

This inadvertent process of mourning problematizes Sontag's belief that "things are campy, not when they become old—but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy [them]" (60). In "Racial Camp," Gubar compares the opposite effects of Mel Brook's *Producers* and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. While it is possible to laugh at the grandiose parody of the Nazi aesthetics, it proves problematic to laugh at the minstrel-show-derived campy depictions of the black male. While Sontag's camp is about enjoyment, Gubar notes that "popular representations of the genial black slave make humor more fraught" (29). This is why it is impossible to unproblematically enjoy Prince's and Michael Jackson's campy performances. With their aristocratic, elegant personas, both artists place themselves at the opposite extreme to the slavery-informed representations of the black masculine body. If the enslaved body is about sweat, blood, and physical labour, they are impeccably slick and primp. If mythical black masculinity is about bestial sexual potency, their performances are deeply de-Oedipalized. By placing themselves in opposition to the cultural scripts of the black male body, they turn the attributes of black masculinity into empty signifiers. While Antony Easthope notes that "masculinity must find itself in the place of the father or not at all" (118), this is precisely what is impossible "in a culture modeled on minstrelsy" (Gubar 34). Indeed, it seems that, in fact, both Prince and Michael Jackson perform their cultural displacement.

Coda: Black Camp Presents and Futures

By transgressing the more rigid representations of black masculinity, Prince and Michael Jackson allowed for a flourishing of more flexible renderings of African American performing subjects in the 21st century. One of the key black representatives of the Queercore scene, a "glamazon alter ego" of Michael David Quattlebaum Jr. (Shulman), Mykki Blanco, originally planned to name her[19] 2016 album *Michael* as a tribute to Jackson, whereas her 2012 mixtape *Cosmic Angel: The Illuminati Prince/ss* can be read as a reference to Prince. Blanco, an Art Institute of Chicago and Parsons drop-out, poet, and performance artist, refers to her oeuvre as "a mixture of riot grrrl and ghetto fabulousness" (Blanco qtd. in Shulman). Highly self-reflexive, she acknowledges the shifts that have taken place since the 1980s: "a lot of the things that made me so taboo in the past have become mainstream" (Geffen). The artist "identifies as genderqueer and femme," but in her performances, she incorporates "the traditional black male braggadocio" (Harris). In a short MTV documentary, Blanco insists that her emotive performances are designed to form an intimate bond with the audience and that she merges authenticity with a chameleon-like attitude by being close to the scene (embedded in Geffen). As Ryan Harris, referring to José Esteban Muñoz's study on "queers of color," argues "'The question is no longer to know whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse, but

18 Spillers writes that under slavery, "a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor's father's mocking presence" (80; emphasis in original).

19 The artist was born as male but chooses to use feminine pronouns to refer to herself (Harris).

Unauthenticated
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to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the "social body."' . . . [Artists such as Blanco seek] to normalize different expressions of being within people. Their 'terrorist drag' acts as affront to prevailing forms of discrimination found in both racial and queer spaces."

Gender bending and aesthetic surplus also mark the performances of multiple artists from the Wondaland label, among them Janelle Monáe, Jidenna, and Roman GianArthur. Their *oeuvre* does not stem from Glam Rock, Hardcore, Hip-Hop, and Punk scenes, which is the case of Queercore, but rather from Funk and other specifically black traditions, although they do merge a vast array of musical aesthetics. Wondaland clearly continues the early 1980s black camp tradition we have analyzed here, and Prince is explicitly listed as the collective's mentor (Royster 188). Moreover, during the 2010 BET Awards performance, Monáe performed *Purple Rain*'s "Let's Go Crazy" in the "Tribute for Princes Lifetime Achievement Award" in front of the artist himself, and she repeated the performance after his death at the New Orleans Jazz Fest in 2016. In her EP *Metropolis*, Monáe introduces the term "cybersoul," "a new form of pop music," which Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim interpret as "a complex blend of multiple, often technologically mediated musical genres." As they contend, "Monáe stands at the center of a new form of Afrofuturism" (alternatively referred to by Hassler-Forest as "neo-Afrofuturism" [3]) that "imagine[s] less constrained black subjectivity in the future and that produce[s] a profound critique of current social, racial, and economic orders." As Dan Hassler-Forest argues in "The Politics of World-Building: Janelle Monáe's Wondaland," her "Afrofuturist music . . . destabilizes not only sf's traditional 'exclusion of people of color' (Bould 177), but does so in media forms with an innate ability to upset the implicit hierarchies of Western culture and the centripetal world-building practices of genre fiction" (10-11). In opposition to the traditional messianic tones of Afrofuturism, "Monáe's collection of on- and off-stage android and human personas is as much post-gender as it is posthuman" (Hassler-Forest).

Although critics writing about Wondaland do not use the term camp to analyse it, they point to a plethora of camp icons to describe its aesthetics: "Monáe moves from David Bowie's high-concept theatrics to Prince's loose-spined, funky splits and squeals . . . to Grace Jones's coolly imperious robot, crossing lines of race and gender, as well as genre, in her allusions and appropriations" and "sampl[es] inspiration from black performance mavericks . . . Little Richard and Michael Jackson" (Royster 187; 190). Apart from its female founder, the collective includes Jidenna, a "onetime conscious rapper turned dandy" and a "superhero guy in a three-piece suit" (Caramanica; Jidenna qtd. in Leight) inspired by the 1920s fashion, whose image brings to mind Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. His single "Classic Man" brilliantly merges the artifice of dandyism and the assertiveness of black bravado. Referring to the song's lyrics, Jidenna contends that "the fact that a man of African descent is going to come out and say he's a man and not just that, but that he's a classic man, is a political statement" (Jidenna qtd. in Leight). Another Wondaland musician, Roman GianArthur, has a "sensitive rocker aura" ("10 New Artists") and—in his wide-brimmed black hat and a golden livery—his fashion style is visibly parallel to Jidenna's. A multi-instrumentalist, GianArthur lists D'Angelo, Radiohead, Jimi Hendrix, and James Brown as the greatest artists, whose line he wants to continue ("10 New Artists"). Significantly, Wondaland's use of camp is clearly and overtly political. As the collective's online manifesto declares, "We believe music is the weapon of the future," and its members are "individuals who won't allow race or gender to be a barrier to reaching their goals."

Despite the differences between the post-riot grrl Queercore of Mykki Blanco and the genre- and gender-bending fantasy of Wondaland, both *oeuvres* have been enabled and, in turn, continue to creatively make use of the black camp tradition solidified in the early 1980s by Jackson and Prince. Thanks to albums such as *Purple Rain* and *Thriller*, thirty years later, the next generation of black camp artists is able to be politically explicit, passionately committed to a better, more inclusive future, and at the same time glamorously joyous and openly emotive in their epicene theatricality and post-black racial expression. Thus it can be read as an example of Braidotti's feminist—and one could safely add, race—politics that "expresses the desire for transformations by taking as its starting point the embodied and embedded, affective and relational structures of our social relations, the mixture of personal and collective, the intimate and the public." The twenty-first-century black camp accurately represents what the philosopher calls "joyful acts of insurrection," which are "critical but also affirmative" and "aim at the counter-production of alternatives to

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the present and to the structures of subjectivity" (Braidotti). Wondaland's and Mykki Blanco's performances exemplify a "joyful affirmation of counter-subjects," which "encourages the counter-production of different political affects and desires" (Braidotti). Braidotti's specific claims about Pussy Riot perfectly fit Queercore and the Afrofuturist Atlanta collective: "[their] politics is all the more effective as it is joyful, affirmative; it puts wings on your feet. . . . [Their] creative acts of insurrection prove conclusively the point that Deleuze and Guattari make more ponderously when they stated that: 'You don't have to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing you are fighting is abominable.' . . . Anarchist feminist Emma Goldmann [sic!] had already anticipated this decades ago, in stating: 'If I can't dance, I just don't want to be part of your revolution.'" If music is "the weapon of the future," the extravagant dancing revolution of the new black camp aesthetics is more than likely to gain more and more impetus and form "an incisive intervention on the *brutality* and *banality* of power" (Braidotti; emphasis added).

The ability of the Queercore and Wondaland artists to treat their camp performances as political interventions while retaining a reflexive distance towards their on-stage personas marks a significant shift in the cultural functioning of the black body. In the early 1980s, this strategy was inaccessible. By blurring their on-stage and off-stage selves and making them "wholly aesthetic" (Sontag 62), Michael Jackson and Prince turned themselves into works of art in an unsettling attempt to defy the cultural scripts concerning black masculinity. On the one hand, this blurring, understandable in the context of the early 1980s, proved fatal. Both artists broke through the binary of minstrelsy vs. racial authenticity only to remain arrested in a de-Oedipalized aesthetic stasis, which turned out an impossible life strategy. However, by crafting their personas in opposition to stereotypical imaginings concerning the black male body and gaining so much cultural resonance, they have opened an imaginative gate to a new generation of artists who presently are able to adopt a more flexible approach towards blackness. Those artists engage in camp performances that do not necessarily extend to their off-stage lives, and yet which are not equivalent to mere drag vogueing. Moreover, their acts constitute radical interventions that disrupt the racial power balance of representation, in which "white people (especially men) traditionally have enjoyed a greater liberty than other to play with racial identities . . . without permanent loss or costs" (Wald 162). Thus overall, the Queercore and Wondaland artists allow for "a shift of attention from the political as a pedagogical, ideological practice to politics as the stressed necessity of everyday life—politics as a performativity" (Bhabha 21). This way, the black camp masquerade of mourning may become a masquerade of enunciation.

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